



Charity & Sympathy Scams

Many people like to give with an open heart to help others in need. Unfortunately, that creates a climate that's ripe for fake charity and sympathy scams and scam artists. They know they can tug at our heartstrings -- and rake in the cash.

Some fake charity scams may set up quasi-legitimate agencies so that, at first glance, they look real; they may also name themselves something similar to other legitimate charities. They may even carry "ID" in the name of the charity, complete with a logo. These scam artists use all of the standard methods to collect "donations" for their charity scams -- tables at the local mall, going door-to-door, email, and telemarketing. All this makes charity scams harder to spot.

Sympathy scams come in many types and flavors. It's the pregnant woman and her child knocking at your door, claiming she needs money to catch the ferry. It's the man whose car ran out of gas around the corner. It's the son who needs to get to the airport to pick up his mother but the car broke down. It's the woman who wants to come inside and use your phone because her boyfriend/husband is chasing her. Some one may have a legitimate need for assistance, while others may take advantage of our willingness to help to elicit money, or worse, gain entry into your home to commit robbery or theft.

However, here are tips to help spot charity scams and actions you can take to avoid sympathy scams

Avoiding and Responding to Charity Scams

1. BE WARY of every opportunity that presents itself -- especially when it presents itself in the wake of some big disaster that gets lots of media attention.
2. Ask for the name, address, and phone number of the charity -- and whether or not it is registered. If the presenters claim that it is registered, get a registration number. The Better Business Bureau Wise Giving Alliance offers information about national charities; you can call 703-276-0100 or go to their website: <http://www.give.org> If you're trying to figure out whether or not some particular charity is worthy of support, check out this section of the site: <http://www.give.org/reports/index.asp> They publish their standards for rating charities, and then rate over 600 different charities using these standards.
3. Verify with the office of the charity that there is indeed a campaign going on, or that they've authorized the charity drive that you're being invited to contribute to.
4. Don't ever donate cash if you can help it. Write a check to the charity -- not to the person standing in front of you. This also helps you document the donation for your records and for your tax return. And don't give out bank information!
5. Ask what percentage of your donation goes directly to the cause. Legitimate charities will have ready answers because they are used to the question.

6. Get a receipt with the name of the charity on it.
7. Be especially cautious about getting a charity donation request by email. Most legitimate charities don't use email for their solicitations. (Some legitimate charities will email people who have donated before -- but never respond to requests where you've never donated.)
8. Be especially wary about charities that claim to be raising funds for the local police or firefighters. Check with them first!
9. Don't give in to pressure or 'guilt trips' about 'suggested donations' or 'requested minimum contributions.' Once you've determined that the charity is legitimate and you've decided you want to contribute, simply give what you can and want to give -- it will be appreciated.
10. The best way we know of to avoid charity scams is to decide IN ADVANCE (while you're doing your annual or monthly budget) which charities you'll support and CONTACT THEM. Then you can gracefully turn anyone else down who comes your way with hat in hand.

For more tips on avoiding charity scams, visit: <http://www.scambusters.org/charities.html>

Avoiding and Responding to Sympathy Scams

1. Don't engage panhandlers. Do not give money. Ignore them the best you can. If they become aggressive (blocking your path or making you walk around them) they are committing the crimes of Aggressive Panhandling and Pedestrian Interference; they can be ticketed or arrested for these offenses.
2. If a stranger comes to your home and asks to use your telephone, offer to place the call for him/her yourself. Never let a stranger into your home.
3. If they claim to live in the neighborhood, ask where. Have them describe how to get to their home.
4. If they claim the car broke down or ran out of gas, ask where and ask if they'd like AAA called to meet them at the car.
5. If they claim they need assistance, offer to make the 911 call for them while they wait on the porch. You may think this is rude, but this is about your safety, not their feelings. Do not let them into your home.
6. Alert your neighbors so they can be on the lookout for someone trying to play a sympathy scam.
7. Get a good description of the person, call 911 and give the best detailed information you can to the operator.

It's great to be a giver -- but give cautiously so you're not enriching scammers or a questionable "charity."

This information brought to you by
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